

Ellis Island processed millions of immigrants between 1892 and 1954, when it finally closed. In the 1980s, the main buildings were restored, and a museum was established on the site. Ellis Island is now part of the Statue of Liberty National Monument.



### 15.3 To Ellis Island and Beyond

At the turn of the century, European immigrants arrived in New York Harbor by the thousands every day. After all they had been through, they looked forward to stepping onto dry land. First-class and second-class passengers—those on the upper decks—did just that. After a brief onboard examination, they disembarked at the Hudson River piers. Steerage passengers, however, had to face one last hurdle: Ellis Island.

The **Ellis Island Immigration Station**, built in 1892 on a small piece of land in the harbor, was the port of entry for most European immigrants arriving in New York. Steerage passengers passed through a set of buildings staffed by officers of the Bureau of Immigration. This was a time of high anxiety for the immigrants. An array of officials would examine them closely to make sure they were fit to enter the country. Some of them would not pass inspection.

**Medical Inspections at Ellis Island** Outside the main building at Ellis Island, officials attached an identification tag to each immigrant. The medical inspection began after the immigrants entered the building. Public Health Service doctors watched as people crossed through the baggage room and climbed the steep stairs to the enormous Registry Room, or Great Hall. This brief observation period became known as the “six-second exam.” People who limped, wheezed, or otherwise showed signs of disease or disability would be pulled aside for closer inspection.

In the Great Hall, the immigrants underwent a physical examination and an eye test. During the brief physical, the doctor checked for a variety of health problems, using chalk to mark the immigrant’s clothing with a symbol for the suspected disease or other problem. For example, an *L* stood for lameness, an *H* meant a possible heart condition, and an *X* indicated a mental problem. Disabled individuals or those found to have incurable illnesses would face **deportation**, a forced return to their home country.

The most dreaded mark was an *E* for eye condition. The doctor would check for trachoma, a contagious infection that could lead to blindness. Anyone with trachoma would certainly be rejected. In fact, this disease accounted for the most deportations by far.

**Legal Interviews in the Great Hall** Immigrants with medical problems would be sent to a detention area. The rest got in line and slowly worked their way to the back of the Great Hall for the legal interview. One by one, they stood



Immigrants dreaded the eye examination because failure often meant being deported. Doctors lifted the immigrant’s eyelids for inspection. Some used their fingers, while others used tools such as a buttonhook. They looked for infection, especially the highly contagious disease trachoma, which could lead to blindness.

before the primary inspector, who usually worked with an interpreter. The inspector asked a list of 29 questions, starting with "What is your name?"

It was once thought that many names were shortened or respelled at Ellis Island, but actually such changes were rare. Passenger lists, including the 29 questions and answers, were created at the port of departure in Europe. Immigrants provided their name, age, sex, race, marital status, occupation, destination, and other information. Steamship officials wrote the answers on the passenger list. In most cases, Ellis Island inspectors merely asked the questions again to verify that the answers matched those on the passenger list.

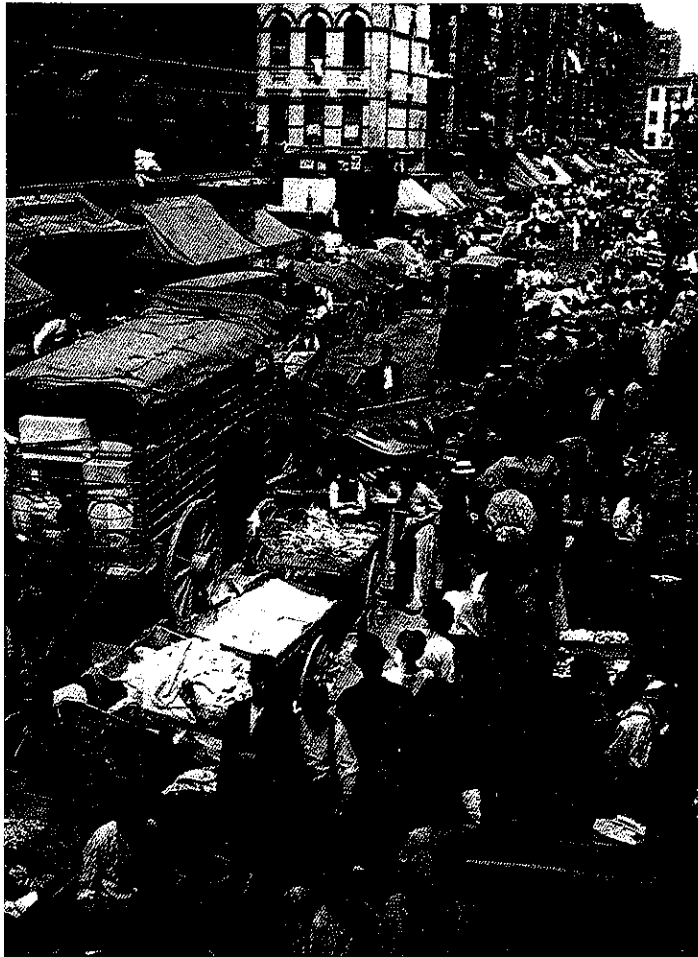
The trickiest question was, "Do you have work waiting for you in the United States?" Those immigrants who wanted to show they were able to succeed in their new country sometimes answered yes. However, the Foran Act, a law passed by Congress in 1885, made it illegal for U.S. employers to import foreigners as **contract laborers**. The law's main purpose was to prevent the hiring of new immigrants to replace striking workers. Any immigrant who admitted to signing a contract to work for an employer in the United States could be detained.

About 20 percent of immigrants failed either the medical examination or the legal interview. This does not mean they were denied entry. Those with treatable illnesses were sent to a hospital on Ellis Island for therapy. There they might stay for days or weeks until a doctor pronounced them fit. Other detained immigrants had to await a hearing in front of a Board of Special Inquiry. These immigrants stayed in dormitories on the second and third floors of the main building, sleeping in iron bunks that resembled those in steerage.



The Granger Collection, New York

Along with receiving a medical exam, immigrants lined up for a legal interview. An inspector asked a series of questions to verify that immigrants could enter the country legally. Immigrants who passed the medical and legal tests would be free to go. Those who failed would be held for days, or even weeks, until their cases were decided.



The crowded tenements and dirty streets of this poor ethnic neighborhood suggest the rough life of the urban immigrant. This scene, however, also reveals why these areas were so appealing. The smells, sounds, and ethnic vitality served to sustain the new Americans in a difficult time of transition.

The board members reviewed the details of each immigrant's case and listened to testimony from the detainee's friends and relatives, if any lived nearby. The board voted to accept almost all of the immigrants who came before it. In the end, about 2 percent of all immigrants were deported.

Most of the immigrants who passed through Ellis Island spent a very short time undergoing medical and legal examination. Yet the whole process, including the waiting time, lasted for several agonizing hours. It ended with the legal interview. Immigrants who passed that test were free to go. Relieved that the long ordeal was over, they boarded a ferry bound for New York City and a new life.

**Beyond Ellis Island: Life in the Cities** Some new European immigrants quickly found their way to the far country of the Midwest. However, the majority of them were in the cities, so most immigrants stayed in New York or boarded trains bound for Boston, Cleveland, Chicago or other industrial centers. As a result, urban population exploded. From 1870 to 1920, the proportion of Americans who lived in cities jumped from about 25 percent to 50 percent.

Newly arrived urban immigrants tended to live in the least desirable districts, where housing was cheapest.

Such areas often contained the factories and shops that provided their livelihoods. Amid the city's din and dirt, immigrants crowded into tenement buildings and other run-down, slum housing. In 1914, an Italian immigrant described such an area of Boston:

Here was a congestion the like of which I had never seen before. Within the narrow limits of one-half square mile were crowded together thirty-five thousand people, living tier upon tier, huddled together until the very heavens seemed to be shut out. These narrow alley-like streets of Old Boston were one mass of litter. The air was laden with soot and dirt. Ill odors arose from every direction . . . A thousand wheels of commercial activity whirled incessantly day and night, making noises which would rack the sturdiest of nerves.

—Constantine M. Panunzio, *The Soul of an Immigrant*, 1969

Immigrants generally settled among others from their home country. They felt comfortable among people who spoke the same language, ate the same foods, and held the same beliefs. As a result, different areas of the city often had distinctive ethnic flavors. Jacob Riis, a writer and photographer, imagined a map of New York's ethnic communities. "A map of the city," he wrote in 1890, "colored to designate nationalities, would show more stripes than on the skin of a zebra, and more colors than any rainbow."